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ABSTRACT

A program was designed to deal explicitly with "learned helplessness" and poor self-concept of six middle school students who were receiving special help in a reading resource room. The students completed an assignment and then reflected in a journal in narrative form on how well they felt they had completed the assignment. Students also completed a self-rating on what kind of thinker each student judged himself or herself to be that week. All students' self-ratings improved with time and a positive dialogue with the teacher was maintained throughout the year. (RS)

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Modifying Self-Concept for At Risk Readers

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Long-overdue attention is finally being focused on those students in our country who are at risk of failing educationally in a variety of ways. One of the most conspicuous educational factors which places students at risk is reading achievement. Initial failure creates more failure, and with that failure comes the concomitant problem of low self-esteem. Aternatively, some children arrive in classrooms convinced either that they cannot learn or, in some instances, convinced that the schools hold nothing of value for them. Whether poor reading achievement or low self esteem come first, few would argue that they are quickly inextricably entwined. The landmark studies of Brookover and his associates (1962, 1965) have given empirical support to the mutually reinforcing nature of self-concept and school achievement. In addition to the problem of poor self-concept, recent literature tells us of the "learned helplessness" which students experience in school in the face of repeated failure (Licht,1983). This behavior is counterproductive as students learn not even to try. Helping students deal with the cognitive aspect of learned helplessness can sometimes be accomplished by teaching them some metacognitive strategies (Cullen and Boersma, 1982). With this in mind, we decided to encourage students to become reflective learners who examined their own learning and thinking. In addition to this metacognitve component of the program, we decided to work explicitly at improving the self- esteem of students determined to be at risk in

reading in a middle school. Our target group was six students who were receiving special help in the reading resource room of a middle school. What is described here are the two facets of the program which attempted to deal explicitly with learned helplessness and poor self-concept.

One vehicle we choose to help students examine their own learning was a dialogue response journal. A journal format was selected in part because it is an ideal medium for reflection. The dialogue format was selected because it allowed the teacher to have an opportunity for positive interaction with each student. It also provided a forum for constant positive feedback, which these students so sorely needed. Students would complete an assignment, and then in their journals would reflect in narrative form on how well they had completed the assignment. A second feature for self-examination in the journal was that each week each student completed a self-rating on a 1 to 5 scale according to what kind of thinker each student judged himself or herself to be that week. Finally, there were two questions to be answered in the journal each week: "What was the best thing you did this week?" "What do you hope to do next week?" In short, we created a process for metacogntive growth and a means of provding positive feedback on a continuing basis.

We were delighted with the results, and so were the students. Their self-ratings went from 1's and 2's (poor and below average) to almost all 4's and 5's (good and excellent). They were beginning to evaluate themselves more favorably as thinkers and learners. Their typical stance of learned helplesness was giving way to a more positive view of themselves as learners.

The narratives in the journals also became a way to monitor progress. We decided that the format of a response journal would give the

most interaction with students. In the response journal, the teacher can comment on what is written in order to provide positive feedback and encouragement for students. A typical interchange was:

(Teacher) "Jeff now that you understand and complete analogies, what kind of job do you think you did in Tuesday's class? What kind of thinker were you?

(Jeff) " I was Good on Tuesday. I was excellent. I was a 5."

Later in the year in the same journal, the teacher asked the student to reflect on his thinking as he was reading The Great Gilly Hopkins:

(Teacher) " Jeff you selected many excellent examples of Gilly's sarcasm, including a few that I didn't even write down in my journal. Can you extend that and think why Gilly would be so sarcastic? Perhaps as you read further, you will have another idea. What kind of thinker were you this week? What do you hope to do next week?"

(Jeff) " I wasn't as good as I could have been. I think I was a 3. But next week maybe I'll be a 5, if I find another reason why Gilly was sarcastic. I know there is another reason, but I don't wat to take the time to find out."

Clearly, Jeff was beginning to take responsibility for his own learning, even to the point of deciding how much energy to expend!

In our opinion, these journals provided a perfect vehicle both for student self-exploration and for positive teacher feedback and scaffolding of learning tasks. In many was the journals were superior to oral interchanges between students and teacher. Both teacher and student could be more reflective, and the students could save all of those good comments in a way that they couldn't do with an oral conversation.

Conclusions

The results weren't magic, but they were extremely encouraging. All students' self-rating improved. By including the ratings in their journals, this improvement was tanglible. Likewise, through the dialogue response journals all students maintained a positive dialogue with the teacher for the entire year. Importantly, the dialogue was, at least in part, a metacognitive one as students examined themselves as learners. We were encouraged by the positive feedback by students and plan to continue both student self-eval-uation and dialogue response journals next year with larger numbers of children in the reading resource room.

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